



# FACT SHEET

354th Fighter Wing Public Affairs  
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## 353rd Combat Training Squadron “COPE THUNDER”

### Mission

The 353rd Combat Training Squadron is responsible for sponsoring training and experimentation in Alaska. The squadron is assigned to 11th Air Force, headquartered at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska; however, the 353 CTS is located and operates at Eielson AFB, Alaska.

The 353 CTS hosts Pacific Air Forces' Cope Thunder, Alaska Command's Northern Edge, and Pacific Command's Cooperative Cope Thunder exercises. Cope Thunder is an Air Expeditionary Force major force certification event. The 353 CTS manages the Pacific-Alaska Range Complex. The PARC contains 3 impact areas covering 90,000 acres and about 68,000 square miles of military training airspace, the nation's largest training range.



Each Cope Thunder exercise is a realistic, 10-day, air combat training exercise held up to four times a year. The multi-service, multi-platform coordinated, combat operations exercises specialize in the joint integration of USAF Air Expeditionary Forces (AEF) with the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Army combat forces. One exercise each year focuses on coalition building with USAF forces integrating with allied units from throughout the world. Each exercise features “Red” opposition forces (OPFOR), “Blue” offensive forces, and “White” forces that represent the neutral controlling agency.

The opposition force includes air-to-air fighters and surface-to-air missile defense forces to simulate threats posed by potentially hostile nations. These forces generally employ defensive counter-air tactics directed by ground-control intercept sites. Range threat emitters — electronic devices that send out signals simulating anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missile launches — provide valuable surface-to-air training and are operated by a civilian contractor as directed by 353 CTS technicians.

The offensive force includes the full spectrum of U.S. and allied tactical and support units. Because the defensive and offensive forces meet in a simulated hostile, non-cooperative training environment, the job of controlling the mock war and ensuring safety falls to the “White” neutral force.

### History

A Pacific Air Forces-sponsored exercise, Cope Thunder was moved to Eielson from Clark Air Base in the Philippines in 1992, when the eruption of Mount Pinatubo forced the curtailment of operations there. When the decision was made to relocate Cope Thunder, Air Force officials viewed Eielson as the most logical choice. That decision was based partly on the fact that Eielson's 353 CTS already controlled and maintained three major military flight training ranges in Alaska.

Initiated in 1976, Cope Thunder was devised as a way to give aircrews their first taste of warfare and quickly grew into PACAF's premier simulated combat airpower employment exercise. Before Operation Desert Storm, less than one-fifth of the U.S. Air Force's primary fighter pilots had seen actual combat. While the percentage of combat-experienced pilots has increased in recent years, a high percentage of pilots haven't been thrust into combat.

Analysis indicates most combat losses occur during an aircrew's first eight to 10 missions. The goal of Cope Thunder is to provide each aircrew with these first vital "missions," increasing their chances of survival in real combat environments.

On an average, more than 900 people and up to 60 aircraft deploy to Eielson AFB, and an additional 250 people and 20 aircraft deploy to Elmendorf AFB, for each Cope Thunder exercise. Most participating Cope Thunder units arrive a week before the exercise. During that time, aircrews may fly one or two range orientation flights, make physical and mental preparations, hone up on local flying restrictions, receive local safety and survival briefings, and work on developing orientation plans.

During the two-week employment phase of the exercise, aircrews are subjected to every conceivable combat threat. Scenarios are shaped to meet AEF mission essential training objectives. At the height of the exercise, up to 70 jet fighters can be operating in the same airspace at one time. Typically, Cope Thunder conducts two combat missions each day.

Since its inception, thousands of U.S. military members from all branches of the military, as well as the armed services of the Philippines, Canada, United Kingdom, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, France, Spain, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea and India have taken part in Cope Thunder exercises. Aircraft involved include the F-15, F-16, F/A-18, EA-6B, A/OA-10, C-130, KC-130, KC-135, KC-10, E-3C, HC-130, various helicopters and British Tornados, Jaguars, Nimrods, VC-10, IL-76 as well as U.S. Army, Marine Corps and Japanese Air Self Defense Force Stinger Teams.

### **Cope Thunder**

The 353rd Combat Training Squadron organizes, plans and executes realistic combat training at Eielson, including Cope Thunder.

All the activities on Alaska's three weapons training ranges – incorporating more than 68,000 square miles of airspace, 28 threat systems, and 225 targets for range and exercise operations – are planned and controlled by 353rd CTS personnel.

The three tactical ranges supervised by the squadron's range division are Blair Lakes, Yukon and Oklahoma. The Blair Lakes Conventional Range is located about 26 miles southwest of Eielson AFB. Isolated in a sub-arctic tundra environment, this range is manned continuously and is normally accessible only by helicopter. The Yukon Tactical and Electronic Warfare Range is 15 miles east of Eielson. Accessible most of the year, this mountainous complex is only manned as necessary to provide electronic warfare training. The Oklahoma Tactical Range is located within the U.S. Army's Cold Region Test Center at Fort Greely, Alaska, and is the largest of the three ranges, encompassing more than 900,000 acres of relatively flat, open terrain.

Cope Thunder exercises take place over Alaskan and Canadian airspace. The airspace – 17 permanent military operations areas and high-altitude training areas, plus two restricted areas – total more than 68,000 square miles.

Cope Thunder's economic impact on the communities surrounding Eielson and Elmendorf AFBs have been large and should continue to be so. In 2001 alone, military members taking part in the exercises poured more than \$2 million into the local economies. Eielson AFB building projects resulting all or in part from Cope Thunder include a \$23 million transient personnel facility, a \$13 million Cope Thunder operations building, a \$35 million air-to-air tracking system; eight two-bay all-weather aircraft shelters valued at \$25 million, and a \$2 million range microwave link. Additionally, the number of threat emitters on Cope Thunder ranges was doubled from 14 to 28 and several of the communication systems between ranges and Eielson have been upgraded.

*(Current as of October 2003)*